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Date of publication: March 5, 1999

A bill introduced this week by Senators Robert Kerrey (D-NE) and Charles E. Grassley (R-IA) to combat the use of child labor in countries exporting to the United States is unlikely to have any positive effect on children, concludes the International Labor Rights Fund, a leading child labor advocate in Washington, DC.

The "International Child Welfare Protection Act" is intended to provide a "positive incentive" for countries to take action against child labor by extending additional trade access to the U.S. market if they ratify ILO Convention 138, which sets a minimum age for employment at the age of completion for compulsory schooling or 14 or 15 years. However, several problems lie in the way of this strategy:

U.S. law already provides special trade access under the Generalized System of Preferences to countries that are "taking steps" to enforce internationally-recognized workers rights, including a minimum age for the employment of children. This bill adds no new incentive.

Many countries with serious child labor problems already have laws on the books making it illegal to employ children in industry under the age of 14, but without serious enforcement. Another law or ratified convention will not by itself decrease the plight of these victimized children.

The U.S. itself has not ratified ILO Convention 138, which makes it difficult for other countries to take seriously our use of this Convention as a condition for our trade with them.

The trade benefits offered under the Generalized System of Preferences (tariff-free access) are declining in value with each year, as the effects of the Uruguay Round of the GATT are implemented.

While we strongly support the intent of this bill, to end the global nightmare of abusive child labor, we believe that stronger incentives and disincentives are necessary to bring about change for the more than 250 million children who toil everyday in the mines, quarries, loomsheds, plantations and factories of the world.

As part of that effort, we call on Senators Kerrey and Grassley to lead an effort to amend U.S. law to better protect children from unduly premature and hazardous work on our nation's farms, and to ratify ILO Convention 138 to put the United States in the forefront in support of international standards.

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